



Population Census

Building Statistical Capacity

A population census is a complete snapshot of a nation's people. It provides information on the size, location, and characteristics of a population. It is the backbone of a national statistical system.

A Population Census:

- provides comprehensive data on a nation's people at the smallest geographical level throughout a country.
- provides data that are critical for policy planning and decision-making across many levels of government, business, academia, and civil society.
- provides data for multiple sectors including population, health, housing, education, nutrition, economics, and agriculture.
- provides a master frame for specific sample surveys during the inter-censal period.
- reinforces a country's administrative records.

Planning, managing, and implementing a population census is an extremely complex endeavor. A well-planned and efficiently managed population census is critical to producing timely and accurate information. The U.S. Census Bureau offers training and technical assistance in all areas of census-taking to help countries achieve the best possible results. These include:

Planning for the Census. A population census is the most expensive data collection activity a country can undertake, involving thousands of workers and millions of dollars of cost. Appropriate long-term budgeting is a critical precondition to conducting a census. A master schedule spanning three or more years can be a key component of successfully implementing a census.

Designing the Census. Well-designed and tested questionnaires and other forms are crucial to the success of the census, as is determining the most appropriate data collection method. Consultation with other government ministries and key stakeholders helps to ensure the collection of appropriate and useful data.

The U.S. Census Bureau works with international assistance partners, such as the USAID Office of Population and Reproductive Health and bilateral and international organizations, to provide training and technical assistance to countries.

For inquiries and additional information, contact:

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Geographic and Mapping Processes. Census cartographic work involves dividing the entire country into enumeration areas to facilitate data collection. This process usually involves an update of previous maps, and often a conversion to digital format. Accurate maps also serve as a valuable tool for analyzing, presenting, and disseminating results. Once high-quality maps are produced, they can continue to be updated for use in inter-censal surveys and future censuses.

Enumeration. Census enumeration is the process of collecting all the required information from respondents. The quality of data collection operations is critical to the overall success and utility of the census, as are field staff training and correctly estimating—in advance—the quantity of field staff needed and their roles. Important factors in the enumeration process include determining field methodology, timing, coordination, logistics, and quality control measures.

Data Processing. Data processing translates the vast amount of information collected in a census into a useful set of statistical reports. It involves transferring data to digital format through scanning or manual entry, editing and imputing incorrect or missing values, and tabulating final census results.

Evaluation of Results. Census evaluation aims to measure accuracy, identify sources of error, and provide guidance for future statistical programs. Although “perfect” results are impossible, census figures that are subject to error are still valuable if the magnitude of the error is known and well understood.

Documentation, Analysis, and Dissemination. A strong program for data presentation and distribution is vital if statistical agencies are to meet the needs of the myriad users of census data. Census stakeholders throughout the public and private sectors increasingly expect better, timelier, and more technologically integrated products and services from national statistical offices.

“A census is the most complex peacetime operation a government undertakes.”

U.N. Population Fund

This is one in a series of fact sheets introducing the Census Bureau and the assistance it provides to countries around the world. The Census Bureau helps countries improve their national statistical systems by engaging in statistical capacity building activities that aim to enhance competencies in several areas in sustainable ways. Topics in this series include:

- Statistical Capacity Building
- Population Census
- Socioeconomic and Demographic Surveys
- Population Estimates and Projections
- The Tool for Assessing Statistical Capacity (TASC)
- CSPro – Processing Census and Survey Data
- Demographic and Economic Analysis
- Geographic Information Systems
- Courses and Workshops